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ABSTRACT

Women must assert their special concerns and take action to control their health care and improve their health. Healthy practices throughout life, including the later years, can have a significant positive impact on the quality of life. Improvement of women's health means taking action through prevention, detection, and treatment. Preventive actions include: (1) eating right through sufficient intake of calcium and fiber, and limiting intake of fat and sodium; (2) getting exercise through finding a form of exercise that meets one's physical abilities, such as walking in the neighborhood, joining a fitness club or class, and looking for senior swim activities; (3) quitting smoking, first through changing to a brand lower in tar and nicotine and reducing the number of cigarettes smoked and then by joining a support group to kick the habit for good; and (4) keeping a healthy frame of mind through group participation, making regular visits to a community center, taking a class, volunteering, maintaining friendships, and reaching out to other women. Detection actions include an annual check-up and screening for blood pressure, cholesterol levels, colon cancer, breast cancer, and uterine cancer. Of special importance to older women is the ability to use the health care system effectively. Acting as a wise and assertive consumer of health care includes finding out about services available through Medicare/Medicaid, getting a second opinion if surgery is recommended, and expressing needs to one's doctor and insisting that he or she listen. (Additional resources are listed.) (ABL)

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Action for a Healthier Life

"I just hate going to the doctor. I only go when I'm so sick, I can't stand it. Unfortunately, it happens more and more lately. Now in my sixties, I've become a diabetic. And, because I waited so long to see a doctor, there have been some complications. I would have gone sooner, but I just didn't realize how serious my symptoms were. I kept thinking, if I went to the doctor, he'd tell me it was nerves that made me run to the bathroom so often. I could just hear him tell me not to worry so much and rush me out of the office like he usually does, to the tune of $35.00 no less! Today, my diabetes is under control and I have a new doctor. I'm on a special diet so I take less medication and I'm on a regular exercise program. Even though I realize how serious diabetes is, I feel good about the care I'm getting and how I'm managing. After all these years, I'm finally taking care of myself."

As with many women—you or someone you know well—this woman's special needs were not being met by the health care system. Older women often encounter the dual prejudices of ageism and sexism. "She's just getting older, that's why she complains so much." "She wants attention, you know how women are." "She's hysterical." "She's cranky." "She's depressed." "She just wants to be young again." "She wants me to perform miracles." Sound familiar?

Typically, providers of health care are not as receptive, or responsive, about women's concerns as women would wish.

Common concerns include:

- Maintaining independence and dignity.
- Facing increased chances of chronic and life threatening diseases.
- Coping with losses and caregiving.
- Adjusting to menopause and aging.

As the primary consumers of health care in this country, women can exert a powerful influence on the complex health system that much of the time seems too busy, too biased, and too expensive to care.

Women must assert their special concerns and take action to control their health care and improve their health. The good news is that women can take action to live longer and healthier lives. Healthy practices throughout life, including the later years, can have a significant positive impact on the quality of life. And, assertive behaviors in dealing with the health care system can change that system for the betterment of all women's health.

Improved women's health means taking ACTION. The next few pages describe some simple steps every woman can take in the areas of

PREVENTION,

DETECTION,

and ***TREATMENT.***

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Older women, in large part because they live longer than men, are particularly susceptible to many health problems, such as osteoporosis, breast cancer, reproductive cancers, diabetes, heart disease, and stress-related mental health disorders that may be prevented by adopting healthier life styles.

Eat Right!

Medical authorities, mothers, and magazines have always told us that a balanced diet is the foundation for lifelong health. A growing amount of scientific evidence also indicates a link between improper diet and chronic diseases. For example, insufficient calcium intake has been linked to osteoporosis, the brittle bone condition that affects half of women over age 45, and 9 out of 10 women over age 75, resulting in 1.3 million hip fractures each year. While it is not yet known whether calcium intake in later years can help with osteoporosis, a well-balanced, low-fat diet, with adequate calcium, is a good idea for women of all ages.[1]

While the recommendations that come out of new research findings often seem confusing and contradictory, there are some simple measures that most women can easily adopt. Following these recommendations can improve overall health and have a positive impact on many conditions and diseases. You can start simply, by reading labels on foods when you're grocery shopping.

Actions **you can take to improve your diet:**

OSTEOPOROSIS

Calcium

Take 1500 mg of calcium daily, through diet or supplements.[2]

BREAST CANCER AND HEART DISEASE

Fat

Fat should make up no more than 30 percent of your total intake of calories.[3]

COLON CANCER

Fiber

Include fiber in your diet each day by eating whole grains, nuts, seeds, and vegetables with edible skins.[4]

HYPERTENSION

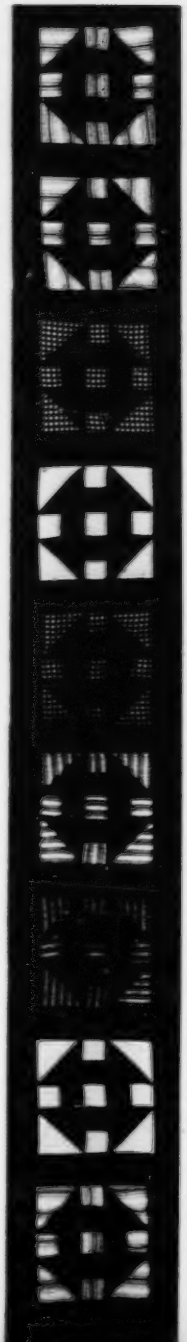
Sodium

Keep your daily sodium intake in the range of 1000–3000 mgs a day.[5]

Get Moving!

The benefits of exercise are both physical and mental. Scientists now believe that aerobic exercise, which elevates the heart's pumping rate, not only conditions the cardiovascular system, but also helps control blood pressure and cholesterol levels. Less tangible, but widely reported benefits, include relief of tension and elevated spirits. People who exercise regularly report that they feel better, have a brighter outlook, and can get rid of frustration and anger through exercise. And exercise doesn't have to be aerobic to have benefits. Exercise that increases flexibility, endurance, or strength can alleviate joint stiffness, back pain, headaches, and a variety of other symptoms commonly experienced by older women. And, studies have shown that fitness is not a function of age; older people can also be fit.

Walking and swimming are particularly beneficial forms of exercise because they do not stress joints or tendons. And, walking requires no special equipment or training. A 20- to 30-minute brisk walk, 3 to 4 times a week can provide aerobic benefits. In fact, any amount of regular walking is beneficial; increasing flexibility, building endurance, and refreshing you mentally.



***Actions** you can take to improve your fitness:*

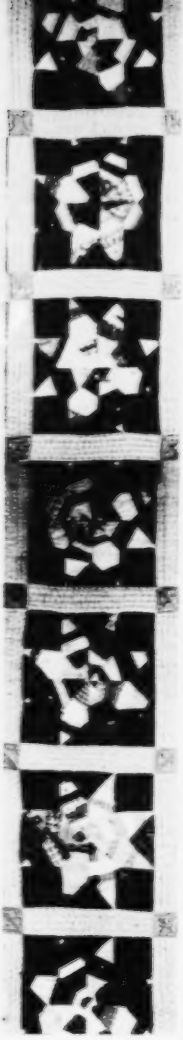
- ***Find a form of exercise that appeals to you and meets your physical abilities and get involved. Consider yoga, tai chi, swimming, aerobics, walking, or dance. Work gradually into the program you choose to avoid injury.***
- ***Find a partner or take your dog and walk around your neighborhood; with a goal of 20 or 30 minutes, 3–4 times a week.***
- ***Call the nearest mall, Y.M.C.A./ Y.W.C.A., senior center, community center, or hospital and find out if there's a walking club or exercise class you can join.***
- ***Look in the telephone book for the closest swimming pool and call to find out if there are special hours for "senior swim."***

Stop Smoking!

Women are smoking at increasing rates and accordingly, more and more women are dying of lung cancer and other forms of cancer. Lung cancer is the number one cause of death in women, surpassing even breast cancer. In addition to causing cancer, smoking increases your risk of developing many other diseases, including osteoporosis, emphysema, and heart conditions.

Many older people believe it's too late to stop smoking. But medical research indicates the opposite. At any age, once you stop smoking, the health benefits begin to accrue immediately, including lowering your chances of contracting cancer and improving your chances of survival should you develop the disease. Stopping smoking will result in a dramatic decrease in rates of coronary heart disease and, even among lifelong smokers, the effects of smoking begin to reverse in 1 to 5 years.*

If you're a smoker, quitting is the single most positive action you can take to improve your health.



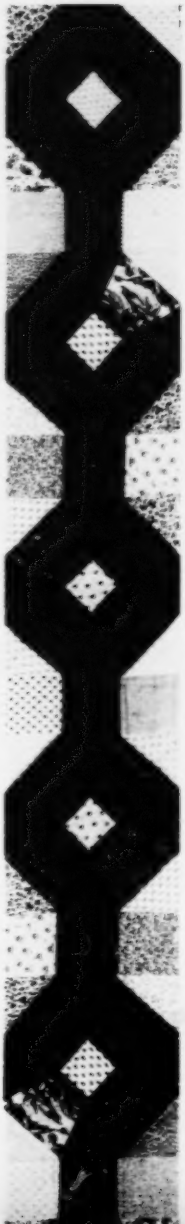
***Actions** you can take to quit smoking:*

- ***Begin by smoking a cigarette brand with lower tar and nicotine. It's a good first step that begins to wean your body from nicotine.***
- ***Then, cut down on the number of cigarettes you smoke each day.***
- ***Join a support group to help you through the process and offer tips on how to kick the habit.***

Contact the local chapter of the American Lung Association, listed in the telephone book, to get information about specific programs on how to stop smoking.

Reach Out!

As women age, the stresses of losing loved ones and caring for aging parents or a disabled spouse or family member are often present. While a period of sadness is an appropriate response to loss, grief, or frustration, some women have problems pulling out of depression and finding the skills to cope with changes in their lives as they age. Some become dependent on medications, tranquilizers, or mood altering drugs. Some retreat to an increasingly inactive and hermit-like existence, simply caring for their basic needs and those they must care for. The treatments for stress, depression, and mental problems—psychotherapy, group therapy, drugs—are as effective with this age group as any other. And, research has found that women who have strong ties to family or friends live longer and are healthier. The problem is reaching those women in need. Informal networks of women, support groups, and social organizations can serve as that vital link.



***Actions** you can take to keep a healthy frame of mind:*

- ***Join a group—one that meets to discuss a book or politics, play cards or exercise, or perhaps a civic group, or a chapter of an organization.***
- ***Visit the senior center or community center regularly.***
- ***Sign up for a class—free or reduced-fee classes are often available through senior and community centers, libraries, high schools, vocational schools, and community colleges.***
- ***Become a volunteer.***
- ***Make friends and invest time and effort in maintaining relationships.***
- ***Look around you—in the next room, next door, down the block—for the woman who needs someone to reach out to her.***

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Detection

Many health problems that older women may develop can be successfully treated if they are detected early. Yet, in general, older women are reluctant to undergo early detection procedures. The majority of women over 60 years old do not have regular Pap smears or mammograms, perhaps believing they are no longer at risk. In fact, the risk of getting breast and uterine cancer increases with age. Four out of five cases of breast cancer are in women over age 50; and 50 percent of all cases occur in women over age 65.[8] Early detection also is crucial with diseases such as diabetes, where timely and adequate treatment can control the disease and prevent debilitating complications.

Risk factors are characteristics or habits that make you more likely than average to develop a condition or disease. Learn the risk factors for heart disease, diabetes, and cancers. Change the ones that you can control and be alert for symptoms if you are at risk.

In addition to following the suggestions in this booklet, have an annual check-up with your family doctor, general practitioner, HMO, etc., including screening for blood pressure, cholesterol levels, colon cancer, breast, and uterine cancer.

***Actions** you can take for early detection of diseases:*

PAP SMEAR

Reproductive cancers

Every other year if negative, every year if any abnormalities appear.[9]

MAMMOGRAM

Breast Cancer

Baseline (Initial reading to get a picture of what is normal for your breasts. This is used as a basis for comparison for later mammograms.) Mammogram by age 39, then every other year after age 40, if your baseline was normal and yearly after age 50.[10]

BREAST SELF-EXAMINATIONS

Breast Cancer

Every month.[11]

Treatment

We all grow more susceptible to disease and health problems as we grow older. But older women have special health needs and concerns. These concerns go beyond medical treatment to issues of access to care and the ability to use the health care system effectively.

Many women accept the care they receive passively, accepting what the doctor says as unassailable truth. Some women feel it "isn't right" to question or demand.

Acting as a wise and assertive consumer of health care is just as important as improving your diet, exercising regularly, and taking adequate prevention measures.

***Actions** you can take to be a wise consumer:*

- ***Find out if you qualify for services under Medicare/Medicaid.***
- ***Find out about available resources to help pay for care not covered under Medicare/Medicaid. Call the local Social Security office or Area Agency on Aging, listed in the telephone book.***
- ***Investigate private insurance alternatives and determine if they are appropriate.***
- ***Check to see if you qualify for benefits under the Health Insurance Continuation law that allows you to continue to be covered by your husband's employer provided policy, for up to three years if he quits, is fired, cuts back on hours, retires and you are not eligible for Medicare, divorces you or dies.***
- ***Have a doctor of your choice who knows you and your medical history.***

◆ *Choose your doctor wisely, considering:*
—Medical training and credentials;
—Recommendations;
—Hospital affiliations;
—Availability 24 hours a day;
—Fees and whether he or she accepts Medicare assignment; and
—Whether he or she takes the time to listen and to explain.

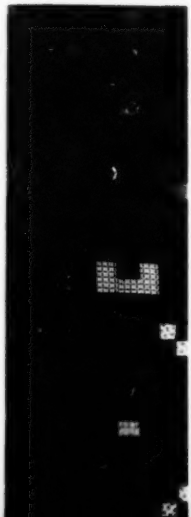
◆ *When a doctor suggests surgery, get a second opinion.*

◆ *Always ask why any tests ordered are being given.*

◆ *Always ask about any medications prescribed. Is there a generic form? What are the side effects? Does the medicine interact with other medicines, foods, etc.? Be sure to let the doctor know about any other medications, prescription or over-the-counter, that you are taking.*

◆ *Don't be intimidated when you speak to your doctor. Express your needs and insist that the doctor listen and respond. If you can't work out a comfortable relationship with your doctor, find a new one.*

◆ *If you feel uncomfortable, intimidated, or forget to ask questions when you visit a doctor, take someone along with you to be a listener or advocate. It may help to write out your questions before you visit.*



By becoming a more informed and active health care consumer, you can get the care you need to reduce the risks of health problems. By sharing this information with other women, you can help more women live healthier and more productive lives.

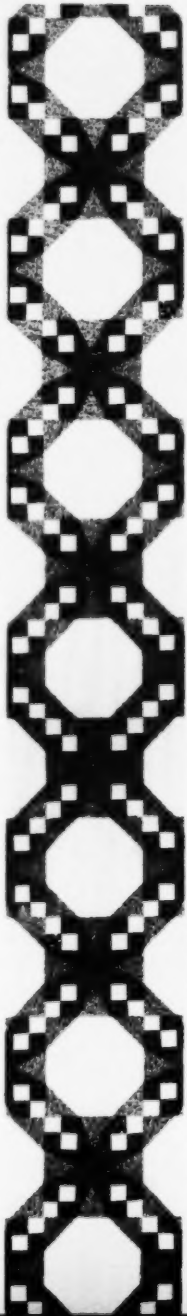
What actions can you take to improve your health? Take a minute to review the suggested actions in this booklet and set some definite goals to improve your health.

Resources

A Woman's Guide to Good Health After 50, by Marie Feltin, M.D. Available from AARP Books. Send $12.95 plus $1.75 for shipping and handling to AARP Books/Scott Foresman and Co., 1865 Miner Street, Des Plaines, IL 60057-0702. If you are an AARP member, send your membership number to purchase the book for $9.45 plus $1.75 for shipping and handling.

Ourselves Growing Older, by Paula Brown Doress and Diana Laskin Siegal. A Touchstone Book published by Simon & Schuster in 1987. $15.95. For ordering information write Simon & Schuster, Inc., Simon & Schuster Building, Rockefeller Center, 1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.

The Women's Health Advocacy Project is sponsored by AARP's Women's Initiative. For more information write Women's Health Advocacy Project, AARP, 1909 K Street, NW, Washington, DC 20049.



The following sources were used in formulating the information presented in this booklet:

1, 2 ***Osteoporosis: Cause, Treatment, Prevention,*** U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service.

3, 4, 5, ***Dietary Guidelines for Americans,*** U.S. Department of Agriculture. "Quit Smoking" Healthy Older People, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion and The American Heart Association.

6, 7 ***Ourselves Growing Older*** by Paula Brown Doress and Diana Laskin Siegal. A Touchstone Book published by Simon & Schuster in 1987.

8 ***The Picture of Health for Midlife and Older Women in America,*** Older Women's League, 1987 and the American Cancer Society.

9, 10, 11 The American Cancer Society